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Spinning Away a Lifetime!

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CASTE IN INDIAN PROVERBS

By MICHAEL A. MATHIS, C.S.C.

ALTHOUGH people at times refer to social distinctions in other countries as caste, yet, strictly speaking, this is not a correct use of the term because caste denotes the social observances peculiar to India alone. The Indians themselves do not use the word caste to designate their social practices. In fact, our term was first used by the Portuguese, during their long and brilliant reign in the East. The term is taken from the Latin word *castus,* meaning pure. The Portuguese had noticed that one of the principal features of the Indian social system was the preservation of purity of stock, so they coined the word "caste" to describe the whole system.

At the mere mention of the word caste most of us in western lands shrink as from some unknown mass of wickedness and stupidity. That there is much of both in the practice of caste in India is true enough, but that all good is excluded is not only unfair but untrue as well. In fact there is hardly a single practice of caste today, even among those things that appear most foolish, which did not originally rest on some sane and even wise social economy.

Take only one example, the absurdity of *worshipping* the cow. Yet the economic reasons for a special regard for the cow are very strong. The cow and the oxen are the two animals most valuable to the Indian population: the cow, because it produces milk and butter, the only animal-derived foods which are safe to eat in that climate; the oxen, because they till the fields from which 73 out of every 100 of India's 353,000,000 people earn their livelihood. In view of these facts and of the periodic famines in this land, it was imperative to protect the cow and oxen from extermination by placing a workable taboo on their consumption as food. This the Indian legislators accomplished by a restriction which in time developed into worship.

Perhaps we of the West can understand at least the social benefits of cow worship by a page from our own experience. Why do we westerners generally feel a repugnance to eating horse flesh, not withstanding the fact that it is just as savory as beef? The reason is that long ago a taboo was placed upon horse flesh as food to preserve horses for draft animals. To attain this object, however, it was not necessary for us to go to the extent of paying divine honors to the horse.

Caste in India is a social institution which for centuries and still today assigns to every Hindu and to a certain extent to each Mohammedan and Aboriginal a man's place in Indian society.

"THE BARBER IS THE OFFICIAL NEWS AGENT"

It is generally agreed that originally there were only four castes, the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaisyas and Sudras. The Brahmins were the priests; the Kshatriyas included kings, nobility and warriors; the Vaisyas denoted landlords and merchants; and the Sudras designated those who worked with their hands, domestic servants and small business or manufacturing people.

In the course of time these four castes went on subdividing so that today we have at least fifty principal castes and from 2,000 to 3,000 subcastes. Thus merchants are subdivided into the following subcastes: money lenders, cloth merchants, grain brokers and the hundred and one various groups engaged in buying and selling. Manual laborers have the greatest number of castes: weavers, potters, smiths, cabinetmakers, tailors, etc. These principal castes of manual laborers have been further differentiated by the kind of cloth weavers wove, the various utensils potters made, etc. Servants also have their castes and subcastes: cowherds, barbers, laundrymen, cooks, etc. Cooks for one caste do not cook for other castes, and so the cook castes have been multiplied.

On the lowest rung of India's social ladder are

those who handle the skins of animals, for example, cobblers and those whose task it is to remove filth, such as scavengers. These are the outcastes who in a way belong to India's social system but merely as degraded menials.

The social ramifications of caste affect practically every phase of Indian life, from birth to the funeral pyre. Hence, it is difficult to single out particular features as characteristic of caste. Among the more important, however, authorities usually enumerate the following: marriage, eating and drinking, employment, bathing, contact with other castes, a common ceremonial and reverence for the cow.

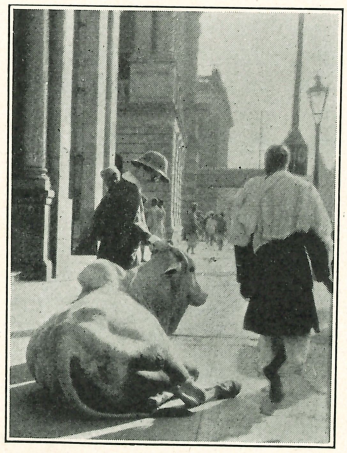
Reverence for the cow and the absolute horror of eating beef is common to all castes. The other features are special to each caste. Hence, an Indian must marry, eat and drink, work, bathe, avoid personal contact with people of a lower caste and follow the common ceremonial for the details of life strictly within his own caste.

With this brief description of caste itself, we may pass on to the understanding of it by the Indians themselves. Perhaps nothing can give this view so clearly as the proverbs that have grown up around caste observance. A proverb epitomizes the experience of all in the briefest and most exact formula. As might be expected, these proverbs exploit the weaknesses rather than the virtues of caste. They are what we might call wise-cracks on the foibles of a system which the Indian loves dearly and obeys instinctively.

Despite the fact that the Brahmin is the acknowledged overlord of Indian society, his weaknesses, as they strike the people at large, are told in the following rhyme:

"Blood suckers three on earth therebe,
The bug, the Brahmin and the flea."

Next in the order of prominence in the life of the people comes the Baniya, the money lender, grain dealer and monopolist who controls the material world in much the same way as the Brahmin does the spiritual. Of him people say: "Your debt to a Baniya grows like a rubbish heap. A Baniya's account, a horse's gallop. If a Baniya's son tumbles down he is sure to pick up something. A Baniya for a neighbor is like a boil in the armpit."



THE BRAHMIN, IT IS SAID, INVENTED COW WORSHIP

The Rajput, the warrior and sometimes landholder, is treated with more consideration than most other castes in the proverbs. "Let him alone when he is full," we are told, "Do not meddle with him when he is empty. He is only bearable in his own house or grave." "A Rajput wedding is like a fire of cornstalks; there is plenty of drumming but very little dinner." "He starves himself but keeps a Bhat (a professional bard) to sing his exploits at his door" (Rajput pride).

The Baidya's (physician) weaknesses are not mere foibles in the verdict of this proverb: "He cannot even find the pulse, yet he doctors everyone; what is it to the Baidya if his helpless patient dies?"

The Jat is the rough farmer in the Punjab. His crudeness, wholesome withal, is not overlooked in the proverbs: "A Jat's laugh would break an ordinary man's ribs." "When a Jat becomes refined there is a great run on the garlic; when a Jat learns manners he blows his nose with a door mat."

The barber in India not only shaves men's faces and trims nails but is the official village news agency as well. Of him the proverbs say: "A slave under a slave and under him a barber." "Throw a dog a morsel to stop his mouth," that is, choke off a reporter with a scrap of news.

Concerning the tendency of goldsmiths (Sonar) to cheat and steal, the proverbs observe: "If you have never seen a cat look at a tiger; if you have never seen a thief, look at a Sonar." "One goldsmith and one who sifts his ashes (two rogues)."

Speaking about the punctuality of the tailor to deliver your suit and the shoemaker to mend your shoes, these Indian proverbs have this to say: "A tailor's 'this evening' and the shoemaker's 'next morning' never come."

The well known inclination of Dhobi's (washerman) to wear customers' suits is thus phrased by a proverb: "The king's scarf is used as the Dhobi's loincloth."

Referring to the acknowledged and unusual stupidity of the Jolaha (weaver), the proverbs say: "The Jolaha was one of twelve, he could only find eleven and went off to bury himself" (he had omitted to count himself and concluded that he was dead).

Perhaps we think that we invented the phrase "painting the town red," but an ancient Indian proverb tells this of the Rangari (the dyer): "a dyer wants to paint the town red" (the point of

(*Continued on page* 8)

STRUGGLING FOR FREEDOM

THE position of women in India has passed through many vicissitudes whose varying details we find portrayed in the history of the country itself. In old vedic times women held a position of honor and power: they were free to take part in every aspect of the mental and social life; old hymns tell us of the women philosophers, of scholars and poetesses; the excessive exclusion of women, the purdah was unknown and child marriage did not exist.

But the Moslem invasion brought many changes. Mohammedanism had no regard for the female sex. Women are forbidden by the Koran to appear unveiled before any man except near relatives. When the Mohammedans overcame the Hindus, the natural tendency to copy a master resulted in many new customs concerning the conduct of women. The seclusion of women became more rigid as a defense against Moslem invaders; partly also for the same reason child marriage originated: to protect girls against marriage or elopement with Mohammedans.

Custom, however, never is stronger than when founded on religious principles. This element was not lacking in the case of Hindu women. In the Brahminical period the priests, the highest caste, realized that they could not have absolute supremacy unless the women were deprived of their former rights and privileges. From that time dates the code of laws or rules laid down for women: to worship their husbands and to have no other desire in life than to obey and serve them. The dreadful lot of widows was one of the consequences of this code. Some sin of the widow committed in a past incarnation is believed to have caused her husband's death and hence the sacrifice of her life is demanded, or since the English laws forbid this custom, a whole life of penance and expiation is her doom.

Abbé Dubois, an authority on Hindu manners and customs, wrote of them: "Women occupy in India a position hardly better than that of slaves. Their intellect is thought to be of very low order. Hindu books say that women should be kept in a state of dependence."

The emancipation of women in India today indeed presents a complicated problem. Female education is altogether neglected. This is not surprising, as hitherto ignorance was considered a proof of innocence and virtue. . . . Only dancing girls were educated! Even in the villages and in parts of India where the purdah system has never entered the position of women is burdensome to say the least. Hard work, and bad treatment from her husband frequently are her daily bread. Still the peasant women, especially in healthy regions, are often physically and mentally the most fortunate.

Contact with the West however has at last aroused the Indian woman. Vigorous efforts are being made to educate the girls and women to make them give up purdah and to realize their dignity and power. The best and most learned Indian women of today are devoting their lives to this ideal, and their successes are undeniable. In Bengal alone there were 22 high schools for girls in 1933. An association for this same purpose founded by Saraj Bahini Dutt, the Mahila Samitis, does excellent work through its centers, in small social service and education. The Nahr's sihsha Samiti has the special task of trying to educate girls and women who do not wish to leave purdah. The number of highly educated women: doctors, lawyers, teachers, nurses, social service workers, even high officials in government service is increasing daily. Papers and magazines list the achievements being made in this field and we cannot help being impressed by the strong and honest devotion of many remarkable Indian women to the cause of their sisters.

It must not be forgotten, however, that the educated women form an extremely small portion of the female population of India. Travancore, always foremost in Indian progress, can only boast of 18 per cent of its women being literate, while the percentage for India in general is as yet only 2 per cent. There are still thousands of women behind the purdah, who have not even felt the desire for education and freedom—the orthodox Hindu women who spend their lives without any social intercourse whatever, in Zenana (women's quarters) engaged in household duties or in long ceremonies of worship to the gods. Then there is the tremendous number of village girls and women, whom education has hardly touched. In some localities these women have a tendency to migrate to large cities. Here they are kept dependent through hard work and insufficient pay and share the lot of the lower caste women in factories and mines, surrounded by the most abject misery. Their homes are worse than stables and they can hardly earn

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TRIBUTE TO MARY

"She wrote no books; she painted no pictures; she thrilled no audiences with her eloquence; she inaugurated no great reform. She spent her life in none of the brilliant spheres for which many of our girls sigh today. She simply lulled a little Babe on her breast; she pressed its face close to her motherheart; she went about her household duties there in a Nazareth kitchen; she filled her water pitcher at the well, lighted her fires, and prepared her frugal meals, unwaited upon, unattended by any, save the angels that hovered unseen. Yet through all ages past, and throughout all ages to come, her name is and will ever remain, the most blessed among women.

THE SOCIETY AT HOME AND ABROAD

WASHINGTON

The departure of another missionary from the motherhouse to supplement the labors of our busy sisters in the Holy Cross Diocese of Dacca, Bengal, is looked forward to by all of us as a joyful event. Appropriately this departure occurs during the harvest season and truly may we be grateful to the Lord of the Harvest for allowing us to participate in His Own Ministry of bringing aid to His sick and suffering members in the foreign mission countries.

This year the happy lot falls to Sister M. Lourdes Gavigan, S.R.N. Although a native of County Donegal, Ireland, and possessing a generous share of Ireland's missionary spirit and plenty of Irish wit, Sister Lourdes received her training at the Royal Infirmary, Liverpool, and in the Maternity Hospital, Birmingham, England. Previous to her entrance to the Society, Sister Lourdes held various nursing posts: among them that of Sister-in-charge of Medical, Surgical, and Maternity wards, and in the latter was Teacher of Midwifery for four years. Considering the vast scope for maternity and child welfare work in Dacca, Sister Lourdes' former experience will be of great value to her. By October 24, Sister Lourdes will have sailed with another group of Sisters destined for the same city in Bengal.

SR. LOURDES OFF TO INDIA

We pray Our Lady of Lourdes to watch over and bless the work of our departing missionary.

They say if you have food enough for two people the Lord will always provide for a third person. Our Procurator faced a slightly different problem: there was food enough for one person, would the Lord provide for the other twenty-six? He did. Or at least those who so generously donated to the "Pantry Party" which the Ladies' Auxiliary held on October 10, did so in His Name.

Father Mathis, C.S.C., thanked the members for their kindness to all of us and then gave Benediction of the most Blessed Sacrament.

Most cordially do we thank the president of the auxiliary, Mrs. Reinohl, and each member individually for all their efforts to make the affair a success.

ENGLAND

The Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries will have Stall No. 18 at the Catholic Combined Charities Bazaar which will be held at Kensington Town Hall on November 21 and 22.

We should be very grateful if the friends of Mater Christi House would contribute fancy articles or sweets to be sold there. Contributions may be sent to Mater Christi House, 98, Thornbury Road, Osterley, Midd.

DACCA

We hear that Dacca was hostess to a charming Indian Lady last week. The Bengal government party was in Dacca for two weeks and one of their number, Lady Miter, who is intensely interested in welfare work, was asked to visit the Health Centre.

"We told the *dhais* (native midwives) from both centres to come at 8 a. m.," Sister Frances writes, "thinking they would arrive an hour later and thus be in time for Lady Miter's reception at 9. Much to our surprise they turned up promptly at 8. (They expected to be given *bakhshish* or else they never would have come.) They were all dressed up and very clean—a thing that never happens when they go out on a case!

"All the poor babies to whom the Health Centre supplies milk came too. For three and one-half hours we had thirty of them here, each with his own attendant. The babies howled, and the attendants kept screaming at us every two minutes to be let go. It was worse than a baby show. Lady Miter was very kind and seemed to be interested in everything."

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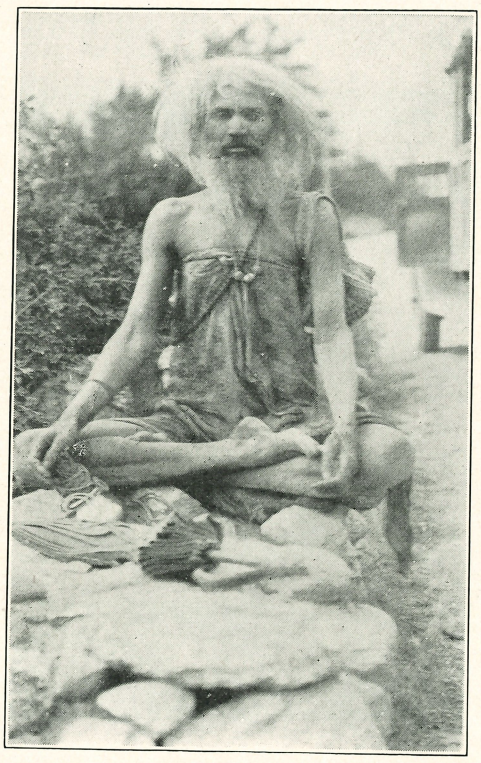
AN INDIAN STREET SCENE

By Sister Mary Laetitia, R.N.

BETWEEN the Punjab and Ceylon the differences in male attire range from almost nothing at all to a heavily padded, bright hued, kind of eiderdown-looking coat, or a nice wooley cover-all, which not by appearance alone spells G-o-a-t!

In Rawalpindi one may meet ten men on the street and no two will be wearing the same type of clothing. One may be a Kashmiri coolie; his attire will consist of a pair of grass sandals, dirty, white cotton trousers and a shirt more or less of the same material. Poor Kashmiri coolie! He may believe in Godliness but cleanliness is foreign to his tastes. All of his possessions would make pretty good zoological preserves. On his head he wears the inevitable skull cap, made of cloth or wicker and in winter he goes in for a thin piece of cloth around his shoulders, called a "warm sheet"; but which fails miserably to afford him the least bit of protection from the cold winds which sweep down from the northern Himalayas. Sometimes he supplements his dress with a little charcoal fire, in an earthenware vessel, which he wears somewhere inside of his clothes. These heaters are very dangerous things and cause severe burns which generally go entirely untreated, with the result that arms become attached to sides and necks to shoulders from adhesions.



THE HINDU ASCETIC ALSO HAS HIS PLACE IN THE INDIAN STREET SCENE

Another of those whom we meet may be a Sikh—a very fine type. He may wear a perfectly tailored suit, which would not disgrace Bond Street, and a dainty, precisely adjusted voile turban, in an exquisite shade of lavender, pink, blue, yellow or white. If he wears the native dress it will consist of a pair of red caliph-like slippers, trimmed with gold, which turn up into points at the toes; a pair of what appear to be riding breeches, with legs as tight as tight can be. How he ever gets into them without a sudden bursting of seams is nothing short of a miracle! Over this is worn a long coat; it fits at the waist but flares below. It is generally made of pink and gold brocade and when crowned by a gorgeous green or blue turban the effect is enough to evoke the jealousy of the gods.

The Punjabi costume consists of a long pair of loose white trousers, called a silwar, and a shirt of cotton or silk, often gaily colored. For head covering he dons a small cap of gold cloth (or at least it is trimmed with gold). Around this five or six yards of cloth are tightly bound, to form a nice neat turban, leaving a couple of feet hanging down the back, which appendage serves a variety of useful purposes, not the least being that of a pocket handkerchief.

The Punjabi shoes vary from good British boots to a heavy wooden shoe which is made only of a wooden sole with a big nail hammered half way into it, around the region of the big toe. The first two toes cling to this nail and the wearer shuffles around the world, somehow managing to keep these would-be shoes in juxtaposition with his feet.

The fakirs and mendicants of India are very picturesque, as a rule. A begging bowl, ashes and hair seem to be the distinguishing features of most of them. The hair is present in great abundance, aided very often by jute or horse-hair, or else completely absent from the fakir's scalp. Buddhist priests have perfectly shaven heads and a long, lovely orange-yellow, flowing, g a r m e n t which seems to be made of voile. Those Tibet way, carry in their hands a praying wheel which contains some holy words; as the wheel turns around the prayers are supposed to be automatically ascending to heaven, which saves a great deal of trouble!

Most of the Hindu mendicants have a penchant for the abundant hair supply. Some of them carry their board of spikes, others have jingling pieces of metal on the end of long sticks; all exhibit the omnipresent begging-bowl. These bowls are often interesting; they vary from an old butter tin to a highly polished half-cocoanut, studded with turquoise or other colored stones, set in brass. The owner is always much attached to his begging bowl, if it is a nice one, and no amount of *bakhshish* will induce him to part with it.

Sometimes in India, one sees a pair of striped European pyjamas taking a walk down the road, the blissful wearer proceeding gravely and proudly

along, under the illusion that he is creating quite an impression in his real "Vilayati" suit. He is . . . if there are any Europeans along the way!

A bath-robe, nice and soft and woolly is also occasionally adopted as a top coat. These two garbs present a very ludicrous picture, especially when worn with a turban and Indian shoes.

Then there is the Parsee gentleman; his abode is in Bombay, and the distinguishing feature of his attire is a large black and grey figured, shiny, leather hat. In front it resembles a fat top hat minus the brim and has a squarish appearance; from the back it has a slant of about thirty degrees, rimmed around so as to form a pocket. From this a venerable grey-beard may be seen extracting spectacles, handkerchiefs, and various other odds and ends.

The Bombay policeman is a picture! He wears a golden halo on his head, which (if rumor speaks truly) he knows right well he is not entitled to and so, for fear of losing it, he has it held in place by a strap under the chin. He wears a blue tunic, shorts of the same color, bare knees, blue puttees, bare ankles and shoes. After a few days in India one becomes quite used to odd bits of uncovered anatomy.

The attire of the village Bengali Christian bridegroom constitutes another oddity. First and foremost a black coat is essential. This he wears over a colored shirt, while his nether garment is simply a cloth, five yards long, wound around his body. On his head he wears an old-fashioned red and white handkerchief thrown on so that two ends fall over his ears and two down the back. Upon this rests a black, silk top hat. Size does not matter, it may wobble on the top of his cranium or may sink well down over his ears. To add to his miseries, when travelling he sits on a bare-backed pony, his arms flung around the neck of two men, walking one on either side of his mount. Then the band starts to play a "muddly" of all the little bits of the few tunes it knows. When the horse begins to rear, the fun begins!

The modes of dress in India are legion—it would take volumes to portray them all; these are just a few of the more interesting ones.

OPIUM BABIES

Indian babies are usually very good-natured. Perhaps their Heavenly Father bestows this gift upon them to protect them. The unfortunate ones, that is those who are born with bad dispositions, are invariably given opium to keep them quiet. It is not only the uneducated either, that are guilty of this crime, for a crying baby is tolerated nowhere. One can pick out these opium babies at a glance. Sometimes, it is true, the reason for feeding them this drug is because the parents have no money for rice, but not infrequently the fault is committed through miserliness and the child is fed opium instead of milk. A *pice* worth of opium will keep a baby from crying for eight days. Thus the little ones waste away from starvation. By having three milk-kitchens we can keep about eighty babies supplied daily. Of course in the district of Dacca one sees more undernourished babies than actually starving ones, but the converse is only too true in the outlying villages.

M. F.

THE MISSIONS OF THE FAR EAST—NOVEMBER MISSION INTENTION

For centuries now, missionaries have struggled against the barriers of paganism in all its forms in the Far East with very meager results. The obstacles, in fact, seem to have multiplied instead of diminishing; the difficulties of language and customs, the hatred of the East for the West—these pale in contrast with the new and insidious forces of Russian atheism and the ever-recurring wars within and without. Forty million people inhabit China, and less than 3,000,000 are Christians! The facts are equally appalling for the other countries of the Far East, namely: Japan, Korea, and Mongolia. Prayer alone can come to the aid of our missionaries in these darkened lands to enable them to light the torch of faith with more success than heretofore.

CASTE IN INDIAN PROVERBS

(*Continued from page 3*)

the original is in the play on the Marathi word, *ranga,* meaning both pleasure and color.

The loquacity of the Machhi's (fishermen) wife is told in this proverb: "a Machhi woman will go on talking even after she has been buried."

There are proverbs also that group certain castes for purposes of emphasis. "When the tax collector is a Jat (a burly, penureous farmer)," the money lender a Brahmin (a heartless exploiter of the weak), and the ruler of the land a Baniya (a merciless merchant), these are the signs of God's wrath." Also "a barber, a dog and a hawk are useless when full; a money lender, a bullock and a king are useless when empty."

SLEEPING SICKNESS

Père Goarnisson, a White Father who is likewise a doctor of medicine, plays an important part in the energetic campaign of the French government against sleeping sickness in West Africa. He directs the medical school at Wagadugu, where the native sanitary agents are trained for work in teams in every part of this section of the Sudan. Much as in North Africa, the Sudan counts many sufferers from eye-diseases, and for them Père Goarnisson conducts an ophthalmological clinic of the first grade. For this work he has the assistance of a group of highly trained White Sisters. In the two years and a half since the opening of the clinic in March, 1932, there have been eighty-seven operations for cataract, 288 of tridectomy, and 390 of trichiasis, with a large number of minor operations. The native tribes-people, who are Mossi, journey distances of over a hundred miles for treatment.—(*Fides.*)

STRUGGLING FOR FREEDOM

(*Continued from page 4*)

enough to keep them alive. The protecting laws in case of childbirth, insurance against sickness, old-age and unemployment are only in *statu nascendi* and the poverty and disease of these classes is indescribable.

The uplift of women in India still has a long way to go and the road is blocked by barriers erected by the Hindus and Mohammedans themselves. These barriers must first disappear: the narrow caste system, the Brahminical priest-rule, illiteracy, untouchability, before they can hope to attain to a free and mature womanhood. If, however, the old Hindu tradition disintegrates and nothing better takes its place, women may be in a worse condition than they were before. In the end pagan societies do not assure to women the safe and respected position which only Christianity can give.

It is the tremendous task of the missionary sisters in India to help towards the elevation of the condition of women and the native sisterhoods are doing their share of the work. Nearly everywhere sisters have access to women even in purdah. Their example in teaching and in bringing medical and social aid is one of the best avenues by which to approach them and the safest means to bring them to the happy state to which they are entitled by Christ's redemption.

SISTER M. ELISE.

OUR BOOTH AT THE EXHIBIT

BROOKLYN'S MISSION EXHIBIT

The varying aspects presented by the Brooklyn Mission exhibit in preparation for Mission Sunday, arranged under the auspices of the Society for the Propagation for the Faith, focused the attention of thousands not only on the universal character of the church's missionary labors in spreading the faith, but also the many-sidedness of the work itself. In the general routine of life people do hear about missionaries, but precisely what they do is all very vague and naturally is all classed in the same category of missionary labors. Indeed, to many who viewed the forty different booths at the exhibit, each one depicting another type of work, and yet all working for the same cause, the extent and specialization of so many activities seemed almost a revelation.

This fact only served to increase the enthusiasm of the crowds which daily surged through the exhibit hall, making a very appreciative audience. Even the children came from far and near to learn more about their brothers and sisters in the mission countries. Brooklyn was truly a grateful recipient to all the efforts put forth by the missionaries and Msgr. Hilpert in behalf of the Propagation of the Faith. At the solemn closing all joined in the fervent thanksgiving to Our Lady, Queen of the Missions, under whose patronage Msgr. Hilpert had placed the affair.

We wish to express our gratitude especially to His Excellency, Thomas E. Malloy, and Very Rev. John Hilpert for giving the Society the opportunity of being present at the exhibit and for the gracious reception we received while there. To our many Brooklyn friends who so generously assisted us we also extend our gratitude.

"I pray for the souls departed, that when they have entered into eternal bliss, they may not forget to pray for me."—St. Augustine.